

Infrastructure Advisory Council

Meeting Minutes

April 30, 2020

Attendees

- Colleen Bailie — West Haven Public Library
- Joe Campbell — Connecticut Technical High School System
- Doug Casey — Connecticut Commission for Educational Technology
- George Claffey — Central Connecticut State University
- Tom Dillon — Independent
- Fred Kass — Trinity College
- Kerri Kearney — Manchester Public Schools
- Ryan Kocsondy — Connecticut Education Network (CEN)
- Michael Mundrane — University of Connecticut (UCONN)
- Brandon Rush — New Milford Public Schools
- Sabina Sitaru — New Haven Public Schools
- Rick Widlansky — Libraries Online (LiOn)

Agenda

- Challenges to the Shift in Remote Learning
- Priorities for Statewide Appropriations
- Recommendations for Policy and Program Next Steps

Meeting Notes

Given the shift to remote work and learning to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, the April 2020 Infrastructure Advisory Council meeting took place via Web conference. The following minutes reflect an assimilation of opinions shared rather than a verbatim record of the conversation.

Welcome

The meeting convened at 1:30 PM with a welcome by Tom Dillon, Infrastructure Advisory Council Chair, who turned the meeting over to Doug Casey of the Commission.

Challenges to the Shift in Remote Learning

Devices and Connectivity

Given the closing of schools, colleges, and libraries to support social distancing, Doug asked members to share the current challenges their institutions and constituents face

regarding distance learning and educational service delivery. Michael Mundrane began by describing some of the ways UCONN has equipped students and professors for online learning. The University provided the opportunity for its 25,000 undergraduate students to borrow iPads for remote learning. To date, only 80 have taken advantage of the offer. Nearly all students have their own devices, which UCONN encourages but does not mandate. Michael pointed out that if UCONN and other institutions defined devices as “valid educational expenses,” they would be covered under scholarships and other forms of financial assistance. During this time of remote learning, Michael has seen the biggest struggle in securing devices and Internet among students from “the middle,” i.e., those who are neither wealthy nor qualify for scholarships. Even some faculty have stated that they do not have home Internet access.

Fred Kass stated that their biggest challenge among the students he serves is Internet connectivity. Trinity has deployed about a dozen loaner laptops among its 2,000 undergraduate students. To help with Internet access, Trinity works with students to assess providers based on where they live, facilitating the procurement of free Internet access, and in some cases providing cellular hotspots (“MiFi” devices).

Colleen Bailie shared some of the challenges that libraries face, in that local budgets will likely shrink considerably in the near future. She has discussed this issue with Dawn LaValle of the Connecticut State Library. In Colleen’s community of West Haven, a \$50,000 grant from Yale and Rotary Club support have provided Chromebooks and MiFis for students to continue learning. Tom shared that his own town of Stratford has addressed the challenge of disconnected students by deploying 50 – 100 MiFi devices.

Ryan Kocsondy shared some observations about MiFis, noting that there appears to be no significant cost difference among providers. For this reason, he questioned whether volume or cooperative purchasing efforts would result in measurable cost savings for schools. He also predicted that the free Internet programs that carriers currently offer will expire once districts begin receiving allocations through the CARES Act [Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief Fund](#) (~\$103M across Connecticut schools). Doug mentioned that national organizations and members of Congress have proposed making home Internet access eligible under Category 2 E-rate funding.

While volume or cooperative purchasing of devices may not provide cost savings to schools, several members expressed a need to compare costs, features, and availability across providers. For example, Joe Campbell of the Connecticut Technical High School System (CTTHSS) described differences in filtering costs and capabilities, data limits, and — perhaps most importantly — device availability. Regarding the filtering requirement for K – 12 schools, Ryan mentioned the free availability of iBoss Cloud through CEN to provide device-based content filtering. Kerri Kearney of Manchester echoed the need for a master list of MiFi programs, given the speed with which many institutions have adopted these devices. Demand may well increase as word spreads among families of MiFi availability. Joe stated that requiring providers to share anonymized data with the State around student use would provide helpful insights into specific applications and bandwidth consumption. Doug took as an action

item the development of a matrix of MiFi offerings to help schools, colleges, and libraries make better informed purchasing decisions.

On the topic of student engagement, Joe indicated that three-quarters of students on the first day of remote learning were online. His district has deployed more than 250 MiFis, though connections remain slow in some rural areas. The CTHS uses device login data, student information attendance, and other measures to quantify student engagement. Another key challenge to remote learning is a lack of teacher preparedness. He did share some of the creative ways in which career and technical education (CTE) teachers provide remote instruction. For example, a CTHSS automotive teacher has used his GoPro camera to demonstrate the process of changing brakes on a car. Other teachers have filmed themselves building sheds for construction classes or styling hair for beautician courses.

Among institutions of higher education, the same challenges exist for hands-on learning with specific equipment or facilities that home learning cannot replicate. Michael shared that UCONN has had to modify or cancel laboratory sections during the second half of the spring 2020 semester. Educational institutions have largely taken the approach of “doing the best they can” this semester, which remains profoundly different from intentionally designing an all-online learning experience, perhaps the scenario schools will face in the fall. Fred concurred and pointed to the implementation of pass/fail grading as an indicator that this period of remote learning has not provided the same level of educational opportunity — and expectations — as in-person classes. Trinity is considering different scheduling options for the fall semester in order to provide some level of on-campus learning while keeping students and faculty safe.

Educator Training and Support

Advisory Council members described various needs for teachers and professors to shift to online learning. Michael saw the end of the school year as offering a time for reflection and planning for online learning in the fall through intentional course design. He noted the outstanding support and guidance coming from [UCONN's Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning](#) and the expectation that, if need be, the University would be able to offer all courses online this fall at a high level of quality. Doing so does not scale easily and remains a challenge for any school or college.

Doug asked the members to identify steps the Commission could take to address that challenge. He mentioned discussions from the [April 23 Digital Learning Advisory Council meeting](#) around the development of an institute or shared courses in online learning. Kerri expressed the need for guidance and best practices around high-quality online course design and instruction. George agreed and suggested that the Commission work with partners to curate examples of effective online courses, noting the benefits of encouraging peer-to-peer supports. The Commission's work in open education resources (OER) could support the creation and sharing of exemplars and courseware.

At the K – 12 level, Kerri felt that curriculum directors would benefit from online learning standards and best practices. People in those roles have responsibility for ensuring

continuity of learning across all grades, especially K – 8. Sabina stated that teachers in New Haven can attend office hours to get assistance with online learning, and a defined course or set of best practices would help educators, especially if designed for their specific grade levels. Given the collective interest in exploring a conference, course, or curation of online teaching best resources, Doug pledged to schedule a follow-up planning meeting among members of both advisory councils.

Priorities for Statewide Appropriations

After establishing some common needs and action steps around connectivity and professional development, the group discussed the allocation of funds under the CARES Act. Both Michael and Fred indicated that the awards that UCONN and Trinity, respectively, received would help offset the losses to date already incurred by those institutions. In UCONN's case, the GEERF award to the University represents about one-third of its current deficit from this year alone. The non-institutional portion of GEERF awards go straight to students (approximately \$300 per student at UCONN). In short, at many institutions the CARES Act funding will not likely go to expanding online learning opportunities but instead help offset losses at these colleges and universities.

At the K – 12 level, federal funding may support the rollout and management of expanded 1:1 computing program. Sabina pointed to the need to support these initiatives, with approximately 100,000 new devices reaching students across the state by the summer. When students return to school, district technology leaders will need to accommodate the increased bandwidth and wireless management demands that these additional computers will require. Some schools do not have standard device-management protocols such as bar coding and inventory-management systems. Districts that receive laptops through the Partnership for Connecticut also face the challenge of integrating these Windows devices into K – 12 environments, most of which are designed for Google Chromebooks. Curating and sharing device-management best practices would benefit all districts facing these challenges.

With or without federal CARES Act funding, the need to get students online persists. The group concluded the meeting with a brief discussion of wireless authentication models. Tom mentioned a partnership in New London between the school district and an Internet service provider whereby all student devices have free access through the registration of their device MAC addresses. Sabina mentioned a similar effort in New Haven. Doug pointed to the [Keep Americans Connected Pledge](#) as a departure point to engage ISPs on making student access free through a platform such as Eduroam. Kerri felt that choosing public housing developments as starting points for such initiatives would bring about immediate, large-scale benefits to the neediest students.

Adjournment

Tom thanked the members for their time and input and concluded the meeting at approximately 3:20 PM.